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ABSTRACT

As a conclusion to a symposium on issues related to diversity and American education reform in the context of Goal 3 of the National Education Goals, this paper summarizes important issues of language and culture that must be faced in the process of implementing Goal 3. One of the prerequisites for dealing effectively with these issues is an adequate foundation of research. The need for accurate information and data from all possible sources is emphasized, and the following categories are identified: program and instructional models; the needs of special populations; processes of second language learning; acquisition of literacy; influence of home and community; assessment issues; and teacher education. Contains 44 references. (LB)

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CURRENT RESEARCH ISSUES IN MINORITY STUDENT EDUCATION

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[*Editor's Note:* The sessions of the symposium served to raise important issues of language and culture which must be faced in the process of implementing Goal 3. One of the prerequisites for dealing effectively with these issues is an adequate foundation of research. While there was not sufficient time during the symposium to consider needed research, we have included a short list of research issues here in order to round out the picture.]

There are many initiatives underway for restructuring and reforming U.S. education. The National Education Goals set the stage for dramatic changes to improve education for all students. These changes will affect racial and ethnic minority students in many ways. All those who have a stake in the education of minority students must be alert and engaged in the process of education reform. And for those who are involved in education reform, it is critical that the minority-group perspective be reflected in all the deliberations that will be taking place.

The Need for Accurate Information

More and better information about minority students is needed in order to substantiate the nature and level of services required. Data from all possible sources need to be compiled and analyzed to give us an accurate and comprehensive representation of the characteristics of our student population.

- Results of the 1990 Census are beginning to be analyzed and are providing an overall picture of the U.S. population and its subgroups (Waggoner, 1991; Vobejda, 1991).

- More data will be available in the near future from a variety of initiatives from the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA), specifically focused on language minority students.

- In one such initiative, an augmentation of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) study will follow Hispanic, Asian/Pacific American, and Native American students from eighth through tenth and twelfth grades to examine how school policies, teacher practices, and family involvement affect education outcomes such as academic achievement, continued enrollment in school, and participation in postsecondary education. (Results for the eighth graders are reported by the National Center for Education Statistics, 1992b.)

Also needed is an examination of services currently provided and services lacking. This is, of course, closely intertwined with efforts to document the numbers of students.

- The last few surveys conducted through the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that the school population as a whole is not being adequately prepared for the job market of the 21st century (Commission on the Skills of the American Work Force, 1990; Marshall & Tucker, 1992), and that, on average, minority students lag as much as 40 points behind their white classmates in reading and math proficiency (Applebee, et al., 1989; Mullis, et al., 1990; NCES, 1992a).

- A recently completed study at the national level found that students with limited English proficiency tended to be more economically disadvantaged than other students. The study also documented differences in the amount and type of instruction

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received by students from different language backgrounds, as well as difficulties in entry/exit procedures for programs (Development Associates, 1986; Burkheimer, et al., 1989).

- A report from the Office of Technology Assessment (U.S. Congress, 1988) documented the state of technology use in the schools and found that minority students had less access to computers and other forms of technology than other students. Gifford (1992) noted the relative lack of software or courseware intended for second language learners.

- An extensive study of programs for limited English proficient students in California (Berman, et al., 1992) found that most secondary schools do not offer these students access to the full content curriculum that they need in order to graduate. This problem is compounded by the shortage of teachers willing and trained to teach such students. The findings of Minicucci and Olsen (1992) concerning the lack of appropriate services for secondary school students are also especially noteworthy. Reports such as these should be carefully examined for their implications at both state and national levels.

Program and Instructional Models

Another major issue is "what works" for educating minority students. Three essential areas need to be addressed: access to appropriate instructional programs, access to the core curriculum, and access to appropriate pedagogical strategies.

- One aspect of the debate has focused on the role of first-language support in instruction of students with limited English proficiency, questioning how much first-language use, if any, is appropriate and for how long (Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991; Cazden, 1992; Collier, 1992). While many sources affirm the importance of first-language support (Krashen, 1991), the debate on program models continues.

- A model that is attracting greater attention is developmental bilingual education, in which two languages (English and another) are systematically used as mediums of instruction (Christian & Mahrer, 1992). This model not only helps to meet the needs of language minority students who are learning English, but it also provides a vehicle for English-speaking students to learn another language.

- Studies of instructional strategies used in a variety of program models have noted that students are forced into a predominantly passive role (Goodlad, 1984; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991). In contrast, a key component of exemplary programs was found to be interactive learning (Cummins, 1989; Garcia, 1991; Tikunoff, et al., 1991).

- In contrast to the teacher-controlled transmission model of instruction common to most classrooms, instructional conversations model classroom discourse on the natural, interactive teaching found in homes and communities and foster the development of critical thinking skills for both minority and majority students (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991; Adger, et al., 1992).

- Another characteristic found in exemplary programs is the integration of English language development with content area instruction (Tikunoff, et al., 1991). This approach is becoming widely regarded as effective, and a new study is underway, with funding from OBEMLA, to document these "content ESL" practices.

The Needs of Special Populations

A derivative of the overall "what works" issue is the concern with meeting the needs of special subgroups of the minority student population. Minority students who also have a handicapping condition or disability, who are gifted and talented, who are migrants,

or who have other sorts of special needs, should have access to the appropriate support services when they need them.

- Many educators are concerned about the process by which minority students are referred to special education classes, fearing both over- and under-identification.

- African Americans are significantly over-represented in special education classes. For example, in the educable mentally retarded category, 41.6 percent of students are African American, although only 21.4 percent of the total school population is African American (Office of Civil Rights, 1989).

- As part of the effort to meet National Education Goal 2 (increasing high school completion rates) newcomers to our schools deserve more attention, especially at the secondary level, as the numbers of older students with limited prior education increase. Special programs and strategies are being developed to meet this need (Friedlander, 1991).

- To address National Education Goal 1 (readiness for school), we need to focus on preschool programs. A recently completed study of preschool programs funded through the Title VII Special Populations Program will help guide the discussion. Early childhood educators are also looking more specifically at the needs of children from non-English speaking backgrounds (Nissani, 1990).

Processes of Second Language Learning

Our understanding of the second-language acquisition process has expanded, but this complex issue is far from well understood. Better understanding of the process has significant practical implications. For example, insights into the relationship between first- and second–language acquisition can help us determine which aspects of learning are language dependent and which are not.

- Recent research suggests that the rate of acquisition of a second language is closely linked with proficiency in the first language. This may indicate that once certain language skills are developed in the first language, they may be built upon in the second (Hakuta & Garcia, 1989). Such findings argue for the need to provide first-language support for students who are in the process of acquiring proficiency in English.

- Language proficiency has also been shown to be multidimensional. For example, academic situations are likely to require proficiency in language that is more cognitively complex and less dependent on the immediate context than language used for social situations (Cummins, 1981; McLaughlin, 1987). Such differences in language proficiency have clear implications for second language learning in a school context.

- Becoming proficient in academic language is an experience which all schoolchildren must undergo, not just those who have a limited proficiency in English. Studies have shown that academic language proficiency is more likely to develop in classrooms where there is an interactive approach to instruction and where there is frequent extended discourse from every student on academic topics (Cummins, 1989; Wells, 1989; Adger, et al., 1992).

- These results are related to work on academic achievement in a second language (Collier, 1989). We need to develop a much better understanding of the attributes of academic language proficiency—what it is, how it is acquired, how it can be assessed—particularly in a second language.

Acquisition of Literacy

Related to second language learning is the question of development of literacy, another issue critical to the achievement of the National Education Goal that every adult American will be literate. For those learning English as a second language, we must consider the factor of first language literacy as well as instructional strategies for assisting learners of various age levels.

- *There has been considerable discussion of the role played by native language literacy in the acquisition of literacy in a second language by both children and adults. It has been suggested that certain literacy skills will transfer to a second language if they are already present in the first language (Hakuta, 1990). There are many unresolved questions, however, particularly about the process of transfer for those who are literate in a language whose writing system is fundamentally different from that of English (non-Roman alphabet, for example).*

- If native language literacy facilitates second language literacy, literacy instruction is then particularly critical for youngsters who come from a non-literate background (many Haitian Creole and Hmong speakers, for example).

- Regarding instructional strategies, there is evidence that whole-language approaches benefit second language learners. According to whole-language philosophy, language is easiest to learn when whole texts (rather than isolated letters, or words, or sentences) are dealt with in real, natural, meaningful contexts. Development of literacy is linked to development of language (as opposed to the arbitrary separation of language into listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills). Work on process writing (Samway, 1992), journal writing (Peyton, 1990), and other manifestations of the whole-language philosophy is beginning to focus on language learners and will continue to help us understand this critical process.

Influence of Home and Community

Minority students come to schools from greatly diverse cultural and experiential backgrounds. Even students from the same native language group vary widely in the experiences and beliefs they bring to school with them.

- *There is a growing body of work on the degree of match (or mismatch) between the home communities of groups of students and the schools they attend, and the effect of this mismatch on academic achievement (Moll, 1991). In both special education and general education classrooms, African American students may feel the effects of the mismatch between their culture and that of the teacher. For example, in reading groups teachers may respond to the oral reading problems of some African American students by correcting their pronunciation and grammar while ignoring content. At the same time, they respond to problems of speakers of standard English in terms of the meaning of the text (Collins, 1988).*

- We are seeing a greater emphasis on bringing community processes into the school environment in order narrow the gap between the two (Moll, 1992), and a much stronger concern for parent involvement in the education of minority students.

Assessment Issues

Accountability is an important concern within the reform movement. As a result, many reform initiatives incorporate assessment components. Fitting linguistically and culturally diverse students into this picture is problematic and represents a major challenge for minority student education. It is critical

that minority students be adequately represented as discussions of student assessment, program evaluation, and teacher evaluation go forward.

In order to serve these students well, we must learn how to identify their needs and monitor their progress. Further, we must devise ways of including them when we undertake large-scale measurements, as the National Education Goals Panel will do in order to measure the nation's progress toward achieving the Goals. On the one hand, measures that may be appropriate for the majority of students may not be appropriate for students who do not share the language and culture of the mainstream. On the other hand, exempting minority students from the assessment process puts them outside the system of accountability and frees institutions from taking responsibility for them.

- Central to the assessment debate is the question of individual student assessment and aggregation of such student data as outcomes for program evaluation purposes. There is serious concern about the appropriateness of most standardized testing instruments for linguistically and culturally diverse students. For second language learners and for those who do not natively speak a standard variety of English, it is difficult to factor out the contribution of language proficiency to the outcome. Many specialists are now recommending performance-based assessments for all students, but especially for language minorities (Palmer Wolf, LeMahieu, & Eresh, 1992; Pierce & O'Malley, 1992).

- Those who are responsible for administering standardized tests must become more knowledgeable about the effects of language in the testing situation. For example, despite the fact that some standardized testing instruments (e.g., CELF-R, 1987) now include descriptive overviews of features of African American vernacular English, there are still documentable instances in which dialect differences are identified as language disorders or speech deficits (Adger, et al., 1992).

Teacher Education

The need for more bilingual and ESL specialists is widely recognized, and responses are being formed at both pre-service and in-service levels. There is also a need, just beginning to be recognized, for additional training for all teachers who work with linguistically and culturally diverse students. The challenge to meet these needs is great.

- The state of California reports that it needs 14,000 more bilingual teachers (Schmidt, 1991). Other states find themselves in less extreme, but similar positions.

- In the District of Columbia, a program is underway to "retool" teachers from a variety of subject area backgrounds into ESL teachers.

- In Florida, a consent decree requires that all teachers of second language learners receive specialized training, not just bilingual or ESL teachers, an acknowledgement that these students are found in, and need special attention in, many classrooms (NCBE, 1990).

In addition to efforts to remedy the shortage of qualified teachers, there is considerable attention being given to improving the process of teacher education and credentialling/certification.

- Two themes are emerging in the development of teachers: reflective teaching and classroom-based research. These themes emphasize the desirability of teachers' development extending throughout their careers, rather than ending with particular training activities.

- Guidelines for teacher certification are also being re-examined in the effort to improve the quality of the teaching force. The initiatives of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, for example, are aimed at setting core and specialization standards for teachers to meet.

Once again, an important issue for minority student education is the need for the stakeholders to be part of the process, to incorporate improvements as appropriate, and to inject the consideration of these students into the setting of standards for teachers.

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